DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 619 SP 037 541

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TITLE	School Reform through Instructional Support: The Pennsylvania Initiative. Part I: The Instructional Support Team (IST) [and] Part II: Instructional Evaluation.
SPONS AGENCY	Pennsylvania State Dept. of Education, Harrisburg.
REPORT NO	IST-400; IST-4-1
PUB DATE	1995-00-00
NOTE	24p.; For related IST documents, see SP 037 535-545.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT	Communique; v23 n8 Jun 1995 v24 n2 Oct 1995
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Change; Elementary Education; Elementary School Teachers; Inclusive Schools; *Instructional Improvement; Models; *Partnerships in Education; Special Education; *Special Needs Students; State Programs; Team Training; *Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS	*Instructional Support; Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

The document features two articles on school reform in Pennsylvania. Part one discusses the Instruction Support Team (IST) (Kovaleski, Tucker, and Duffy). The IST process is an intensive building-based pre-referral intervention program to assist elementary students experiencing difficulty in the classroom. The IST is a working group of teachers and other school professionals that helps teachers find solutions to instructional challenges through classroom-based assessment and collaborative problem-solving. Over a 5-year phase-in period, all 501 Pennsylvania school districts have initiated the IST program. Training is provided at the school level by IST Project consultants who assist team members in the design, planning, and implementation of the program. The components of the training are: collaboration and team building, instructional assessment, instructional adaptation, student discipline, and student assistance for at-risk issues. Each school's implementation of the IST process is evaluated by validation teams. In the initial phases of the project, an average of 50,000 elementary school students have been assisted by the IST process annually. Referrals for multidisciplinary evaluation and placements in special education have been reduced substantially in schools enrolled in the IST process. Part two discusses instructional evaluation (Kovaleski, Lowery, and Gickling). Instructional evaluation is a procedure in which a student's need for special education is systematically examined through an analysis of the student's responses to classroom-based interventions. The multidisciplinary team (MDT) uses the instructional evaluation process to analyze the level and intensity of the intervention(s) needed in order for the student to succeed in the regular education setting, or whether special education may be required. The MDT gathers the data necessary for making eligibility decisions and for design of an IEP for eligible students. A re-evaluation process reviews the student's IEP, determines which instructional approaches and techniques have been successful, and recommends changes to the IEP. (Contains 22 references.) (ND)

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Communiqué

Volume 23, Number 8 June 1995

and

Volume 24, Number 2 October 1995

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IST

The Instructional Support Team

SCHOOL REFORM THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT: The Pennsylvania Initiative

Part I: The Instructional Support Team (IST)

Reprinted from:

Communiqué
National Association of School Psychologists
Vol. 23, No. 8
June 1995

Instructional Support Team
Project of Pennsylvania
1110 Enterprise Road
East Petersburg PA 17520

#400
6/95

A Systematic Search for What Works!

SB637541

National Association of School Psychologists

School Reform Through Instructional Support: The Pennsylvania Initiative

Part I: The Instructional Support Team (IST)

by Joseph F. Kovaleski, James A. Tucker, and Daniel J. Duffy, Jr.

Overview Of Instructional Support

Since the mid-1980s, there have been wide-ranging calls for reform in special education and school psychology (Kovaleski, 1988, Reschly, 1988; Reynolds, Wang, and Walberg, 1987, Will, 1986). In response to these challenges, in 1990 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania began a system-wide effort to restructure its special education program. In this and a future issue of the *Communiqué*, this reform effort will be described. Part I in the series (this issue) will feature the implementation of the Instructional Support Team (IST) process, an intensive building-based pre-referral intervention program. Part II of the series will review the changes made to the multidisciplinary evaluation procedures that include an instructional evaluation of all referred students. Both the IST process and the instructional evaluation have as a central element a longitudinal analysis of the student's response to intervention as the primary indicator of the student's need for further services.

Critical to the implementation of the IST process in Pennsylvania was an emerging national consciousness that the quality of instruction is a fundamental issue in the provision of special education. Traditionally potent issues, such as over-representation of minority students in special education were shown to be related directly to the nature and quality of instruction being provided in both regular and special education (Hargis, 1989; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Messick, 1984).

Thus, it was by design that the revised Special Education Regulations, adopted by the Pennsylvania State Board of Education and ratified by the Pennsylvania legislature, were structured around the idea of instruction rather than categories of service-delivery. In an address delivered to the American Education Finance Association, Robert Feir, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania State Board of Education said, "The most significant change in the regulations was to focus on instructional needs of students, rather than on perceived internal deficiencies of students." (Feir, 1992).

Also, for five years prior to the implementation of the pilot IST programs in Pennsylvania, similar pilots had been operating in Connecticut (results to be reported elsewhere). The data on what works and what doesn't work that came from the Connecticut pilots were invaluable in setting up a viable model to fit the unique qualities of Pennsylvania's new special education regulations. It was not necessary to rediscover certain fundamental elements that were critical to initial success.

Pre-referral Intervention through IST

The 1990 Pennsylvania Special Education Regulations and Standards stipulated that each elementary (K-6) school develop an Instructional Support Team (IST). Over a five year phase-in period, all 501 Pennsylvania school districts have initiated the IST program in order to assist any elementary student (grades K through 6) who is experiencing difficulty in the classroom due to consistent academic, social-emotional, or behavioral problems. The instructional support process helps schools create a seamless system of support within the school for students and teachers where assistance for the student who is at risk for school failure is provided in the regular classroom.

Although members of the Instructional Support Team may differ from school to school, the team always includes the building principal, the student's classroom teacher, and a support teacher. Parents are encouraged to participate as members of the team. School psychologists, remedial math and reading specialists, guidance counselors, speech therapists, school nurses, or other classroom teachers may also serve on the IST, depending on the needs of the child. The support teacher is selected by the school district to assist regular education teachers in meeting goals set by the team. Support teachers are specially trained and work under the direction of the school principal. They have no assigned caseload; their duties are related to the tasks, procedures, and timelines of the IST process. The support teacher works directly with students to assess their needs in the classroom and to model strategies for teachers, parents, and others who may provide direct services and support to the child. In all cases, the IST plans for the support teacher to "phase out" direct in-

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volvement with a student in favor of the classroom teacher or other regular education personnel. The support teacher is an essential part of the IST training process in that the services provided by the support teacher are in the regular classroom and serve as modeling for the classroom teacher. As part of the phasing out process, the classroom teacher is encouraged to engage in guided practice in collaboration with the support teacher.

The instructional support process is based on the concept that teachers need assistance in meeting the increasingly complex academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs of their students. The IST is a working group of teachers and other school professionals that helps teachers find solutions to their instructional challenges through precise, classroom-based assessment and collaborative problem-solving. Teachers and parents are encouraged to request instructional support, which can be loosely defined as an instructionally supportive activity which is designed to enable the student to master course work as assigned in school or to accomplish individual learning goals over and above those of assigned course requirements. One IST trainer aptly described the purpose of instructional support as a "systematic search for what works" (E. Moe, personal communication, 1991). When a classroom teacher or parent requests instructional support, team members work side by side with the classroom teacher to search for what will work for the student by systematically manipulating instructional variables and appraising the student's reactions to these changes. As effective interventions are identified and selected, the team assists the classroom teacher to incorporate the strategies into the daily instructional routine through modeling and guided practice. This classroom-based, collaborative aspect of the process promotes a generalization of the new strategies to other students or to the whole class.

While providing support for teachers and students, the instructional support process simultaneously serves as the required screening process for further referral for multidisciplinary evaluation for determination of special education eligibility. Through a process of instructional assessment (see below), the IST establishes whether students can profit from interventions in regular education, or whether they require services and programs that extend beyond regular education to be successful. By assessing the effectiveness of the intervention plan, the team decides whether the student can be supported through the regular education program or whether the student's "degree of need" indicates an evaluation for special education programming.

The IST also works to assure that the entire continuum of regular education services are coordinated in meeting the needs of all students. Too often a student falls in spite of a wide range of available programs because services are not coordinated to meet the student's needs. This concern applies both to school-based services (e.g., Title I, guidance, school psychology, bilingual education, etc.) as well as to external services provided by community agencies. The instructional support process directly addresses service coordination so that students do not "fall through the cracks" (Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987).

Including Students with Disabilities through IST

It is increasingly clear that students with disabilities can be effectively educated in a regular class environment. Staff resources are used in new and creative ways when schools aspire to practices that support students with disabilities in the regular class setting as the first and preferred option. In Pennsylvania schools, the IST serves as a bridge between special and regular education. When a student with a disability is involved in regular environments for participation over all or part of the school day, the IST can help the regular class teacher develop accommodations to promote the student's success. The team also can facilitate the best use of support services to help the teacher meet the student's specially designed instructional needs as stated on the Individual Education Program (IEP). In this way, when a special educator or related service provider delivers the specialized instruction, it can be given within the context of the regular education class.

Instructional Support Training

Training in instructional support is provided by the Instructional Support Team Project, an initiative sponsored by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The Commonwealth's training design for elementary instructional support includes the assignment of a team of training consultants to schools that initiate IST training. These consultants assist the school principal and other team members in the design, planning, and implementation of a multi-year training effort that involves all members of the professional staff as well as parents and community members. This effort requires changes in many established practices and procedures, especially those involving the role of the classroom teacher in addressing the needs of students with learning, behavior, and emotional needs.

The training, which is highly specific and skill-oriented, is provided in five content areas: 1) collaboration and team building; 2) instructional assessment; 3) instructional adaptation; 4) student discipline, and 5) stu-

dent assistance for at-risk issues. The method of training is differentiated according to the specific roles of principals, support teachers, specialists, and teachers at large. Training is primarily hands-on, in classrooms—not in didactic workshops (though some such training is also involved). Trainers must be experienced in the skills involved.

On-Site Training

Because IST is a state-mandated program, training and support services are provided at the school level. During the first year of training, IST consultants provide intensive guidance in the development of Instructional Support Teams by organizing in-district training in the critical components of instructional support, by offering guided practice in the components for support teachers and team members, and by coordinating local networks of support teachers and teams. After the first year, school districts continue to receive training and support through their local intermediate unit. By providing training at the school sites, consultants have the opportunity to model instructional support, demonstrate effective instructional strategies, and facilitate guided practice on the part of the support teacher in training. The district has the opportunity to have many of its personnel participate without the added cost and effort of sending personnel out of the district. The general aim of instructional support training is the development of effective techniques that will give the regular education teacher the ability not only to solve the learning problems of one child, but also to generalize that knowledge to serve the needs of each child in the class.

Principals' Training

Elementary school principals participate in the Pennsylvania's Principal Training Model, a multi-day workshop and seminar offered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Instructional Support Team Project. This training, offered the summer prior to the school's participation, provides principals with intensive training in each of the components of IST. Principals work with other building principals who have experience with the program. During this training, regional networks of building principals are organized for follow-up and on-going support. Over 1,000 principals have participated in this training.

The critical importance of the building principal as the instructional leader of a school is one of the most consistently reported characteristics of effective schools (Steller, 1988). For the past 10 years, both in the Connecticut pre-referral intervention pilot sites and in Pennsylvania's IST implementation sites, it has consistently been shown that the professional commitment of the building principal is an effective predictor of success in the implementation of effective instructional intervention in a school. This involvement has to be more than verbal assent; it has to be skill-based, and that almost always involves a serious commitment to training.

Components of Training

In order to provide effective instructional support to a wide range of students in the regular classroom, training in critical educational practices and processes is essential. The training components that have been identified for inclusion in the IST training initiative are based on educational research in school effectiveness (Steller, 1988; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989), as well as on the results of pilot programs undertaken in Connecticut and Pennsylvania. In the pilot school districts of Connecticut, for example, the precursor of the instructional support team model had shown that when one or more of the specified elements are not included, the results are significantly reduced.

Collaboration and Team Building. The central element of an effective instructional support process is staff collaboration. Three particular aspects of collaboration have been incorporated into the development of the instructional support process: team building, problem-solving, and team maintenance. Team building and maintenance focus on the establishment of an effectively working team, and on those procedures that allow the team to continue to function in a thorough and efficient manner. The problem-solving approach gives the team a structure through which individual student difficulties are addressed. The purposes of using a collaborative problem-solving approach are to prevent learning and behavioral problems, to remediate learning and behavioral problems, and to coordinate instructional programs (Rosenfield, 1987; West and Idol, 1990).

Through the collaborative problem-solving process, the team helps the classroom teacher to identify the student's specific school difficulty, set measurable goals, and identify effective instructional strategies. The process also assures that the identified strategy is established and supported in the classroom through the assistance of team members (e.g., support teacher, school psychologist). Finally, the success of the intervention is evaluated and plans are made for the continuation of successful strategies.

Instructional Assessment. Instructional assessment is a process that systematically analyzes a student's response to instructional strategies in a sequence of study. It includes procedures that directly assess performance within course content for the purpose of determining instructional needs (Gickling and Thompson, 1985). Unlike traditional norm-referenced assessment that test the student on unfamiliar material, a critical feature of instructional assessment is its use of actual classroom materials to gauge classroom performance. It provides teachers and other educators with an unprecedented level of precision in evaluating a student's academic needs.

Initially based on the concept of curriculum-based assessment (Coulter, 1985; Gickling and Thompson, 1985; Hargis, 1987; Tucker, 1985), instructional assessment allows educators to analyze mismatches between the student's instructional level and the demands of the tasks faced on a daily basis. This approach is tied to the principle that prolonged student failure and confusion is often a direct result of failure by the school to assure a consistent instructional match between the student and the curriculum. Instructional assessment is a dynamic process used to identify and refine instructional strategies that have a high probability of success, and to guide instruction as the student learns. Instructional assessment is naturalistic and occurs in a classroom under everyday conditions.

In addition to its use in designing and guiding instruction, the process of instructional assessment also allows the instructional support team to screen students for consideration for multidisciplinary evaluation to determine special education eligibility. Through the instructional assessment process, the student's reaction to specifically developed interventions in the regular classroom is measured according to the student's rate of learning of the curriculum-based tasks. The concept of rate of learning is based on the common observation that students learn skills at different speeds and with different levels of support needed for the acquisition and retention of new material.

The student's rate of learning may be analyzed according to the rate of acquisition and rate of retention. The rate of acquisition is defined as the relative ease with which a student learns new information or acquires appropriate skills. The rate of retention is defined as the ability of the student to retain and use information or skills in meaningful ways. Each of these concepts presumes the provision of an intervention period (e.g., through the IST process) during which the student's academic functioning is assessed directly in curriculum materials, or during which behavior and social skills are assessed in the regular school environment. Following these assessments, specific interventions are implemented, technical assistance is provided to support the instruction, and the student's progress is analyzed according to his/her ability to acquire and retain the learned material.

Instructional Adaptation. Many students in the regular classroom display learning difficulties, although they may or may not receive supportive services such as Title I or special education. These students may have problems in reading text, participating in class discussions, organizing information, working independently, completing in-class assignments, locating and sequencing information, writing legibly, listening to class presentations, communicating through written expression, and completing homework assignments. As these students approach the middle school years, they may also have trouble taking notes, studying for tests, using complicated study guides, and applying general study skills. In spite of these difficulties, these students can make progress in regular education environments through adaptations in instruction and assessment.

The purpose of the instructional adaptation component of instructional support is to provide teachers with models for adapting materials and evaluating student performance. Instructional materials adaptation requires changing the format of instructional materials without changing the content. Performance adaptations require the same performance from students, but in alternative formats. The goal of both approaches is to provide students with different ways to learn the same content and demonstrate mastery.

The instructional adaptation component of IST is based on the work of Project ADAPT (Huck, et. al., 1989) which was also developed in Pennsylvania. The materials included in the manual were developed and field-tested in actual classrooms. In adapting instructional materials, eight activities are highlighted: structured study guides, information organizers, skeletal outlines, what-you-need-to-know charts, concept activities, application activities, games, and manipulatives.

In addition to adapting instruction, students with learning needs also require adapted approaches to classroom assessment. In this area, traditional classroom tests are adapted in order to allow students to display their knowledge without being penalized for poor test-taking skills. Techniques used to adapt tests include alternatives to written tests, modifications of written questions, simplification of response levels, and modification of testing materials. In addition, techniques to adapt grading procedures are presented, including multiple grading, coded grading, grade contracts, accommodation checklists, and incentive grading.

Student Discipline. The approach to classroom discipline that has been incorporated in the IST process is based on the establishment of effective interaction patterns between adults and students. The notion that interactions between parents, teachers, and students are critical in the resolution of classroom discipline problems is based in the family systems approach. Recently, Valentine (1987, 1988) has translated this approach into a series of procedures that have direct relevance to the resolution of difficult discipline problems in the classroom. Valentine's model focuses on communication patterns between adults (teachers and parents) and students. It examines what teachers actually say and do, and compares and contrasts effective and ineffective patterns of communication and interaction.

Valentine (1987) has theorized that communication and interaction patterns are first formed by underlying belief systems. These belief systems have the effect of channeling or limiting one's expectations for a student. These expectations are then communicated to the student as unclear or mixed messages. For example, if it is believed that for some reason the student is not able to stop fighting because of the family he comes from, the adult holding that belief will express doubt about the student by giving vague, unclear directions to the student, (e.g., "See, if you can control yourself just this once."). Belief systems may be examined and challenged by looking for evidence that the student can behave and do as expected, thus removing excuses that might be used for allowing the student to misbehave. Once the adult believes that the student is capable of appropriate behavior, the adult's communications to the student can then be analyzed for their effectiveness in conveying a clear message to the student.

When student behavior does not conform, even in the face of clearly worded directions, supportive and non-punitive back-up techniques are designed. These techniques, summarized in an individual discipline plan, emphasize supervising the student in the performance of the required task/behavior rather than punishing him or her for failing to comply. Including parents from the beginning is critical if the program is to succeed. The parents' support is solicited from the initiation of the plan so that the student knows that the parents and the school agree on their expectations for appropriate school behavior. The student is clearly prevented from "playing one side against the other."

The effective interaction patterns approach also facilitates the involvement of school psychologists, guidance counselors, and mental health specialists from community agencies in cases of severe behavior problems. Working with the school, family, and student, the mental health practitioners assist the team in addressing the student's difficulties.

Student Assistance for At-Risk Issues. In today's world, many children are forced to deal with a range of stressful events and trauma, including exploitation by others and the impact of other stressors (e.g., abuse, neglect, loss, chemical dependency, mental health problems, unemployment, etc.) that place them at risk for current school failure and eventual long-term impairment. Life crises are often manifested in behavior problems and/or deficits in academic performance in the classroom. The link between an environmental stressor and resultant performance problem in school can be traced to the affected students' absence of coping skills.

The student assistance component of instructional support training addresses the need to build personal coping skills which prevent discipline problems from developing. The training focuses on life skills and strategies to improve students' self-concept, identification and communication of feelings, decision-making, and social interaction skills (Clabby & Elias, 1986; Gresham, 1985). This component provides a context for interventions that address the whole child.

Special Trainings

In addition to the five basic training components, the IST Project provides specialized training to better serve the needs of all students in the Commonwealth. In conjunction with the Pennsylvania Department of Education's GATEWAYS Project for inclusive practices, the IST Project provides training to Instructional Support Teams in best practices for working with students with severe disabilities in regular environments. The IST Project also has developed specialized training in assessment and interventions for students who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and for students where developmentally appropriate practices are relevant.

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Evaluating the Effectiveness of the First Process

To facilitate an orderly and effective implementation of the concept through the state of Pennsylvania, the state's regulations allowed for a five-year phase-in of the IST. The first and succeeding years have been re-

ferred to as succeeding "phases" in the implementation of the model. The districts that implemented IST in the first year (1990-1991 school year) were called Phase I districts. Districts that began implementation of IST the following year (1991-92 school year) were called Phase II districts, and so on. The data presented in this report are from the first three years (phases) of the program.

Validation

The State's regulations that establish Instructional Support Teams also specify the means by which a local district demonstrates accountability in operating a functioning IST. The term used in the state regulations to verify a high-quality IST process is "validation," and specific requirements are set forth by which state monitors are able to determine whether or not the IST process has been implemented effectively.

Validation determines the effectiveness of a school's implementation of the IST process. In its second year of implementation, a school's IST program is evaluated by validation teams. This three person team might include a principal, support teacher, guidance counselor, school psychologist, special or regular education teacher, intermediate unit consultant, or IST consultant. The team's task is to determine whether a school has all required IST elements in place. Specifically, the validation process assesses the level of implementation of the required elements, the need for improvement in one or more elements, and exemplary implementation of one or more elements.

The validation process consists of interviews with team members, parents, teachers and students, observation of classrooms and team meetings, and a review of student records. The features which are evaluated are:

1. Organization and management of the IST: Includes elements such as team membership, adherence to timelines, and required documentation;
2. Student assessment: Includes problem-identification based on assessment in the instructional curriculum, life stressors and coping skills, and/or discipline techniques used with the student;
3. Design and implementation of classroom interventions: Includes the establishment of the intervention in the regular classroom by the support teacher or other team member and the teacher's incorporation of the intervention into the regular classroom routine;
4. Team work: Includes the IST's engagement in a collaborative problem-solving process;
5. Screening by IST and referral to multidisciplinary evaluation: Includes procedures for identifying students for instructional support and the use of the IST process to screen students for further MDE;
6. Training: Includes the school's participation in all required training activities leading to the validation review;
7. Outcomes: Includes required documentation (e.g., reports to Department of Education of number of students served by IST) as well as data on IST effectiveness for individual students.

Based on the results of the validation process, a district or school will receive additional training and support as needed. Schools achieving validation are eligible to use their special education allocation for IST costs in ensuing years.

To date, approximately ninety-eight percent (98%) of the schools that have been reviewed have met all of the basic validation requirements. In addition, based on independent ratings, over 90% of schools reviewed have in place the elements deemed to be indicative of effective practice within two years of initiation of the program.

Numbers of Students Served by IST

Results indicate that the longer a school has been involved in the IST program, the more frequently teachers use the process. In the 1992-93 school year, schools in Phase III (first year of training) identified 7.4 % of their student population for instructional support. Phase II (in their second year of operation) identified 9.6% of the student population. Phase I schools that have been involved in IST since the 1990-91 school year (third year of operation) identified 10.7%. The average IST in Pennsylvania serves a total student population of approximately 500 students. If each team serves 10% of the students, that means that an average of 50 students are being served by each IST in a given school year. When multiplied by the number of schools that have implemented IST throughout the Commonwealth, is can be estimated that a average of 50,000 elementary students have been assisted by the IST process annually.

Placements in Special Education

Since the initiation of the project, it has been a goal of the IST program that referrals for multidisciplinary evaluation (MDE) for special education and ultimately placements in special education would be decreased because teachers would become better able to provide effective instructional programs for students in the regular classroom. Figure 1 compares referral rates for MDE in schools that were using IST during the 1992-93 school year with those schools that had not yet implemented the IST process. These data indicate that teachers in non-IST schools refer approximately 3% of the student population for MDE, while teachers in IST schools refer 2% or less of the population. This represents a decrease in MDE requests of between 33% and 46%.

A substantial difference in the actual number of students who are placed in special education as a result of instructional support can also be observed between schools that had not yet enrolled in the process (non-IST) and schools in various phases of the IST program. These data indicate that students involved in the IST process are placed at the rate of 1% or less of the school population. In an average school of 500 students, five or fewer students are being identified for special education as a result of IST. Compared to schools that are not using the process, these data represent differences of between 38% and 48%.

Retention in Grade

Another goal of the IST Project has been that retentions in grade would be used less frequently in schools that utilize the IST process. For Phase I, Phase II, and Phase III schools, substantial decreases in the use of retention in grade have be seen during the years of implementation of instructional support. Figure 2 displays representative data from Phase I schools. Compared to data from years prior to IST, schools are seeing as much as a 67% decrease in the use of retention in grade. It should be noted that these trends can be seen as a possible predictor of subsequent decreases in drop-outs as these students enter high school.

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Figure 1

Students referred to MDE during 1992-93 school year in IST (phase 1-3) and non-IST schools

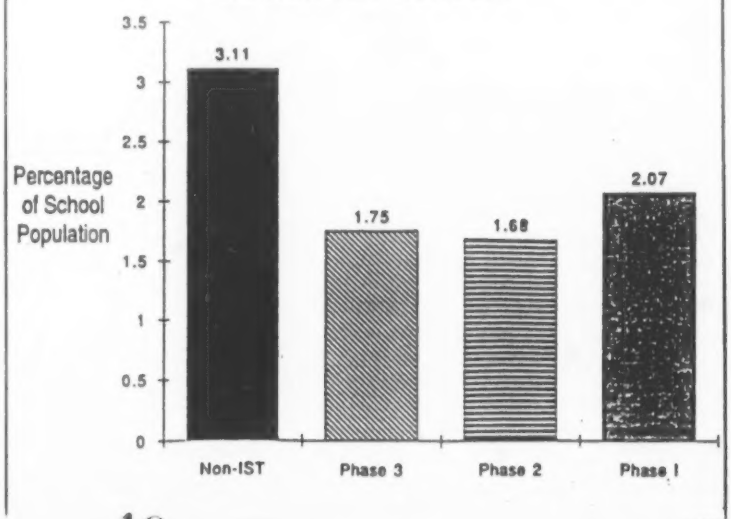

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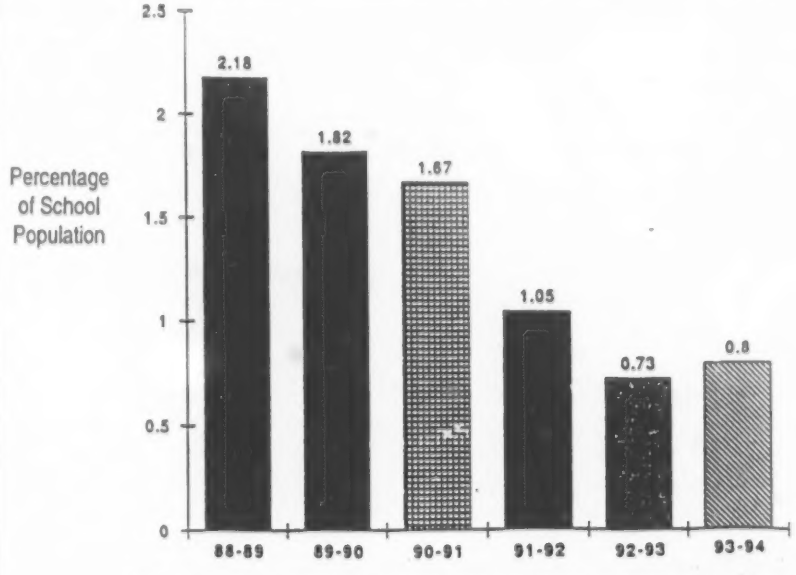
Figure 2

Percentages of students retained in grade before and after implementation if IST in Phase 1 schools



Note: Phase 1 schools started IST in 1990-92. Based on data from 99 schools.

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IST

The Instructional Support Team

SCHOOL REFORM THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT: The Pennsylvania Initiative

Part II: Instructional Evaluation

Reprinted from:

A Systematic Search for What Works!

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#401
10/95

SCHOOL REFORM THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT: THE PENNSYLVANIA INITIATIVE

Part II: Instructional Evaluation

by

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In the June, 1995 issue of the Communiqué, the Instructional Support Team (IST) process was introduced as part of the school reform effort currently under way in Pennsylvania. Of equal relevance to school psychologists are the changes that pertain to the manner in which multidisciplinary evaluations (MDE) are conducted. Added to the typical MDE requirements is the provision of an instructional evaluation, a procedure in which a student's need for special education is systematically examined through an analysis of the student's response to classroom-based interventions. Because of the close connection between the revised MDE procedures and the work of ISTs, the reader is referred to the June, 1995 issue of the Communiqué (Kovaleski, Tucker, & Duffy, 1995) for a complete description of the instructional support team activities that are referenced below.

The concept of the instructional evaluation was initially introduced by Dr. James A. Tucker, who was Director of the Bureau of Special Education of the Pennsylvania Department of Education when the Regulations and Standards were revised in 1990. His pioneering work in articulating the exact language of the Pennsylvania Regulations is acknowledged by the authors.

The 1990 revisions of the Pennsylvania Regulations and Standards for Special Education redefined special education as "specially designed instruction to meet the needs of an exceptional student" (§ 14.1). A student is eligible for special education if:

> (1) The individual has one or more . . . physical or mental disabilities,
>
> and
>
> (2) The individual is determined by an IEP team, based upon recommendations in a multidisciplinary evaluation, to need special education. (§ 14.1).

The multidisciplinary team (MDT) is charged with evaluating both of these criteria as they review and develop their recommendations on a referred student.

Evaluating the Presence of a Disability

Historically, MDTs have focused almost exclusively on the requirement that the student display evidence of a verifiable disability. The Pennsylvania MDE process maintains this premise. The multidisciplinary evaluation must be sufficient in scope and depth to investigate information relevant to the student's suspected exceptionality, including academic functioning, adaptive behavior, social behavior, learning problems, learning strengths, educational needs, and information obtained as a result of pre-referral intervention (instructional support) activities. The MDT is required to determine if the student has one or more physical or mental disorders, including autism/pervasive developmental disorder, serious emotional disturbance, neurological impairment, deafness/hearing impairment, specific learning disability, mental retardation, multihandicap, other health impairment, physical disability, speech and language impairment, and blindness/visual impairment (§ 14.1)

It remains the prerogative of the MDT (and by implication the school psychologist) to determine what data should be collected to inform the decision regarding definitional eligibility for special education. Norm-referenced and other assessment procedures may be used to examine the functioning of the student according to the definitions of the various disabilities. In this regard, the Pennsylvania requirements are similar to those of other states.

Evaluating the Need for Special Education

To determine if the student needs special education, the Pennsylvania Standards stipulate that an instructional evaluation will be performed on each student who is to be considered for eligibility for special education programs. Section 342.25 (j) reads:

> Evaluation of students suspected of being exceptional and in need of special education services and programs that address academic skills shall include an instructional evaluation consisting of an assessment of the basic academic content that the student is expected to learn, shall yield the student's rate of acquisition and the student's rate of retention and shall result in a determination of the type and quantity of instructional support that is required to maintain the student at the student's instructional level.

This standard indicates that the instructional evaluation will not consist of a static testing situation, but should be based on an on-going analysis of the student's actual responses to effective instruction, usually in the context of an instructional support process. While the standard addresses an assessment of "basic academic content," it equally applies to the assessment of social/emotional, behavioral, developmental, and communication skills that contribute to a student's academic performance and adjustment to school.

The concept of the instructional evaluation has its foundation in the provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Regulation 300.541 of this act specifies the criteria for determining the existence of a specific learning disability, including the following language:

> A team may determine that the child has a specific learning disability if ... the child does not achieve commensurate with his or her age or ability levels in one or more of the areas listed in Paragraph (A)(2) of this section, *when provided with learning experiences appropriate for the child's age and ability levels* . . . . (italics added)

In referring to the written report required for this determination, Regulation 300.543 indicates that:

> Whether there is a severe discrepancy between achievement and ability *which is not correctable without special education and related services* . . . .(italics added)

Both of these provisions of IDEA clearly indicate that *bona fide* attempts to intervene with a student in a regular classroom program are required prior to further psycho-educational assessment for special education eligibility. Special education services can be considered only when appropriate interventions have been attempted and found to be unsuccessful within the scope of the regular classroom, including the continuum of regular education services. Attention to "appropriate experiences" (i.e., appropriate interventions) and "correctable" difficulties has been a portion of the law which has been largely ignored in favor of the more simplified yet indirect determination of severe aptitude-achievement discrepancies. Likewise, these specific procedures stand in contrast to traditional practices in which the provision of appropriate learning experiences in regular education were presumed, rather than assessed, for each student who was thought to be eligible for special education.

The intent of the instructional evaluation process as described in Pennsylvania's Standards is to provide a systematic and data-based evaluation of ability of a continuum of regular education services to meet the student's educational needs. The MDT evaluates the student's degree of need for special education by determining the amount and type of instructional support that is needed to maintain the student at instructional or optimum learning level. This degree of need is based on information provided by instructional assessment procedures. Instructional assessment is a longitudinal, empirical, formative assessment process that parcels out the effects of poor instruction and program ineffectiveness from a student-centered disability. This distinction can only be undertaken by manipulating the learning environment and observing its effects on student performance. To this end, the student's reaction to carefully planned intervention becomes the basis for determining the degree of instruction and program modification necessary for the student to be successful.

To clarify terminology, instructional assessment is a formative data-collection process designed primarily to guide instruction. Instructional evaluation is a summative activity that serves to review the data collected through instructional assessment for the purposes of informing decisions regarding eligibility, program, and placement.

The instructional assessment is typically conducted during screening as part of the instructional support process (Kovaleski, Tucker & Duffy, 1995). The Instructional Support Team (IST), as specified in the Special Education Regulations and Standards, is designed to provide team-based collaborative approaches which assist teachers with interventions to address the needs of students identified as being at risk for school failure. The IST process seeks to provide precise and appropriate assessments that can guide effective instruction during the instructional support period.

The goal of instructional support is to assure that students are taught at their instructional levels and that they are reinforced at their independent level throughout the intervention period. Students' reaction to their instruction can be assessed according to their rates of acquisition and retention, leading to an analysis of the extent to which the regular classroom environment can accommodate and sustain their progress. Whenever student progress is sufficiently maintained in the regular classroom through instructional support so that the rates of acquiring and retaining skills and information meet the goals set by the intervention team, the student is not in need of special education services since the student does not display the need for special education to achieve success.

When students are referred for MDE, it is the role of the MDT to evaluate the sufficiency of the instructional assessment that was conducted during the instructional support screening process. If the instructional assessment has not been completed (e.g., when parents directly request an MDE), or if the MDT judges it to be insufficient to determine the student's need for special education, the MDT has the responsibility to conduct the instructional assessment as part of the MDE. If the MDT judges the previously conducted instructional assessment as sufficient, the information is incorporated in the Comprehensive Evaluation Report (CER) of the MDE process. Instructional assessment data become part of the basis on which to evaluate the student's need for special education.

The multidisciplinary evaluation should be a multi-step process during the 45 days established by regulation. In order to have time to complete all of its required work during this period, including conducting the instructional assessment, if necessary, the MDT needs to review existing data early in the 45 days. At this review, the MDT judges the thoroughness of the instructional assessment data and plans the other evaluation procedures that it will conduct to assure that a comprehensive evaluation of the student is completed by the end of the period. School psychologists play a central role in these decisions, as it is their responsibility not only to design a series of assessment techniques that inform the decision about definitional criteria, but also to have input regarding the adequacy of the instructional assessment. (In many cases, school psychologists may have already been involved with the instructional assessment in their role as consultants to ISTs.) A final review of all collected data is conducted at the end of the MDE process.

Whether the instructional assessment is conducted as part of the IST process or is undertaken as part of the MDE, the purpose of the instructional evaluation is to address a series of critical questions that require the MDT to review the procedures and evaluate the outcomes of the instructional assessment. These questions are detailed in Table 1.

Inherent in the instructional evaluation is the concept that the student's rate of learning. The concept of rate of learning is based on the common observation that students learn skills at different speeds and require different levels of support and practice to gain mastery over each new learning event. The instructional evaluation requires the MDT to evaluate the student's learning rate as part of the determination of the student's need for special education.

To actualize the student's rate of learning, the concepts of rate of acquisition, rate of retention, and degree of need were developed. The rate of acquisition is the relative ease with which the student learns new information or acquires appropriate skills. Rate of acquisition can be conceptualized as a tool to measure the appropriateness and efficacy of interventions generated and implemented through the instructional support team process. As such, the rate of acquisition is a measure of student progress towards a target behavior and/or intervention goal(s). The rate of retention is the ability of the student to retain and use information, skills and strategies in meaningful ways. Rate of retention can be conceptualized as a tool to measure student knowledge, mastery and application. As such, the rate of retention can be a measure of student's ability to recall, apply and/or generalize previously acquired information, skills, and strategies in useful ways.

The degree of need is the amount, extent, and duration of instructional support required to maintain the student at an instructional or optimum learning level. The degree of need can be conceptualized as the discrepancy between the student's performance level (with appropriate instructional support) and the minimal classroom expectations before and after the implementation of the intervention. As such, the degree of need is a measure of the ability of the regular education program to maintain the student at instructional level in the regular classroom placement.

It should be noted that the rates of acquisition and retention represent data-based instructional concepts, and not norm-referenced concepts. In practice, these rates of learning are best implemented through the use of formative assessment procedures such as curriculum-based assessment and behavioral assessment. These techniques, which feature ongoing descriptions and changes of student performance, provide the level of precision needed to monitor the student's response to interventions over time. The MDT bases its decision about the student's degree of need on data that are derived directly from the instructional assessment procedures generated in the classroom. An appraisal of the student's rate of acquisition, rate of retention, and degree of need presumes the provision of an intervention period (e.g., through an IST process). During this period, the student's academic functioning is assessed directly from the student's performance using classroom curriculum materials. The student's behavior, communication, and social skills are assessed in the regular classroom and school environment. Specific

interventions are implemented to teach the student at an instructional level, with technical assistance provided to support the maintenance of the student at an instructional level. Throughout this process, the student's progress is analyzed according to his/her ability to acquire and retain the learned information, skills, and/or behaviors.

The MDT uses the instructional evaluation process to analyze the level and intensity of the intervention(s) needed in order for the student to succeed in the regular education setting, or whether specially designed instruction (i.e., through special education) may be required.

Instructional Evaluation and the IEP

Data from Pennsylvania's IST Project indicate that 85% or more of the students who are screened by the IST process are successful in regular education programs and are not referred for MDE. For those who are referred, the MDE process is designed to gather the data necessary for making an eligibility decision and for the design of an individual educational program (IEP) for those found to be eligible for special education.

As in other states, Pennsylvania's requirements for the IEP include:

- the student's present levels of educational performance,
- statements of annual goals and short-term learning outcomes which are responsive to the learning needs identified in the evaluation report, and
- a determination of student response to short-term learning outcomes.

The IEP requirements denote that the assessment and evaluative requirements of the IEP process should be formative, ongoing, recursive, and data-based. The requirements would preclude sole reliance upon the use of indirect, norm-referenced assessment procedures and would emphasize criterion-related and/or curriculum based assessment techniques. The most appropriate method for obtaining the data needed to fulfill the IEP requirements is through instructional assessment procedures and the instructional evaluation process. Thus, there should be a clear "trail" of data that begins in the instructional support process, is verified in the MDT's instructional evaluation, and is incorporated by the IEP team. This information includes appropriate instructional objectives and instructional strategies that are designed to bring about meaningful student progress. This linkage of data from IST to MDE to IEP induces all aspects of this process to be

based on the student's need rather than merely on eligibility requirements. These procedures also provides the data needed to revise the IEP (i.e., annual IEP review) and provides the assessment framework for future re-evaluations (i.e., biennial re-evaluations).

Instructional Evaluation and the Re-evaluation Process

The re-evaluation process should provide MDE/IEP teams with the necessary data and information to help develop a program which will enable the exceptional student to meet academic, social, emotional, behavioral, vocational, and other goals written in the student's IEP. The re-evaluation process essentially has three broad purposes: (1) examining the efficacy of the student's current educational program, (2) examining the appropriateness of current interventions (specially designed instruction) in effecting student progress and determining of future needs, and (3) determining the student's continuing eligibility for special education. Accomplishing these three broad purposes requires a flexible and meaningful assessment process.

Like the initial evaluation process, reevaluation should be based on assessment data that monitors student progress through a functional assessment of the student's performance in a specific program/placement option. Pennsylvania's Regulations specifically require re-evaluations to include a review of the student's current IEP, a determination of which instructional approaches and techniques have been successful, and recommendations for the IEP. In conceptualizing the re-evaluation process, instructional assessment should be routinely conducted as part of each student's ongoing special education program. Because the assessment of the eligible student's progress on pre-set objectives is an IEP requirement, instructional assessment provides a precise method of analyzing student progress and the effectiveness of the special education program on a formative and continuous basis.

The purpose of the instructional evaluation in the re-evaluation process is to review and evaluate the outcomes of ongoing instructional assessment data in a summative fashion and to provide recommendations for the need for specially designed instruction and/or program modifications in the proposed IEP. A protocol for conducting the re-evaluation according to instructional evaluation procedures is presented in Table 2.

The issues of appropriate implementation of instructional evaluation and assessment are far more than compliance concerns; they are fundamental to the identification and delivery of appropriate support services to all students with disabilities. The instructional assessment and evaluation process provides a powerful framework for initial multidisciplinary evaluation, IEP development, program review, and re-evaluation. By emphasizing an

assessment of student's performance in response to precisely designed instruction as the primary indicator of program effectiveness, the probability that successful programs will be designed and delivered will be greatly enhanced.

Reference

Kovaleski, J.F., Tucker, J.A., & Duffy, D.J. (1995). School reform through instructional support: The Pennsylvania Initiative. Part I: The Instructional Support Team (IST). NASP Commmunique, 23, No. 8.

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TABLE 1

Protocol for Instructional Evaluation in Initial MDEs

1) What initial assessment was conducted?

   a. Structured interviews of teachers and parents
   b. Systematic observations
   c. Permanent product review
   d. Records review
   e. Behavioral/performance inventories and checklists
   f. Assessment of academic performance in the context of the curriculum used.

(2) What problem areas were identified and analyzed?

   a. Curricular -e.g., instructional level established
   b. Instructional - e.g., classroom environment/strategies analyzed
   c. Student - e.g., academic learning time data, learning strategies, coping skills
   d. Life Skills/Ecological
   e. Behavioral/Affective
   f. Speech/Language
   g. Other

(3) Were precise goals identified?

(4) Were the goals consistent with problem identification?

(5) Were measurable objectives set?

(6) Was an appropriate intervention plan developed?

   a. Was initial assessment data linked to the intervention plan?
   b. What target variables were selected for intervention?
   c. Was the strategy established in the regular classroom with assistance of the IST?
   d. Could the instructional environment accommodate the intervention strategies?
   e. Was the student taught at the instructional level throughout the intervention period?
   f. What progress monitoring was utilized?

(7) Were on-going data on student progress collected during the intervention period (e.g. graphs, charts, scoring scales)?

(8) What progress did the student make in response to the intervention?

(a) Rate of acquisition
(b) Rate of retention

(9) What is the student's degree of need?

a. Was the intervention sufficient to determine whether the student's needs could be met in the regular classroom using the continuum of services?
b. If not, should interventions be redesigned and re-implemented during the MDE process?
c. Considering the regular education continuum of services, what is the ability of the regular education program to maintain the student at an instructional level?

(10) What additional data should be collected by the MDT to inform the eligibility decision?

TABLE 2

Protocol for Instructional Evaluation in Multidisciplinary Reevaluations

(1) Analysis of existing conditions:

- a. Curricular
- b. Instructional
- c. Student
- d. Environmental

(2) Analysis of student progress:

- a. Short-term objectives:
  1. Rates of acquisition
  2. Rates of retention
- b. Annual goals

(3) Identification of successful instructional strategies and activities through as an assessment of student performance in response to precisely designed curricular, instructional, and student interventions (specially designed instruction).

(4) Recommendations for continuation and/or modification of specially designed instruction

- a. Curricular
- b. Instructional
- c. Student
- d. Environmental

(5) Degree of need defined as the amount and extent of support required to maintain the student at instruction (success) level.

(6) Determination of continuing need for special education services (specially designed instruction) and/or special education services to maintain the student at an instructional level.

(7) Determination of what additional data should be collected by the MDT to inform the eligibility decision.